

# The Influence of Customer-to-Employee Interaction on Customer Behavior Intention

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**Keywords:** Customer-employee interaction; Social support; Behavioral intention

**Abstract:** In the service-oriented Hotel industry, customer-employee interaction directly affects customer experience. From the customer's point of view, this paper introduces social support variables and constructs the relationship model of customer-employee interaction, social support and customer behavior intention. A total of 245 valid questionnaires were collected from high-star hotel customers. Structural equation model was used to analyze the data. Research shows that customer-employee interaction has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention and social support; social support has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention; social support has a mediating effect between customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, the economic proportion of the third industry in China is getting higher and higher. Hotel, as the third service industry, has developed rapidly in China recent years, and the market competition tends to be white-hot. Therefore, with the background of rapid economic development, how to attract more customers and improve the competitiveness of the hotel has become a common problem that hotel managers must think about. Hotels provide services directly to customers. The interaction between customer and employee is one of the important forms of social interaction, and it's also the basis for customers' perception of service quality, value and satisfaction [1]. Meanwhile, customer-employee interaction affects customers' willingness to repurchase and recommend [2-4].

Existing studies suggest that customer-employee interaction has an impact on both employees and customers. Customer loyalty is the driving force for hotel's sustainable development as the hotel cannot develop without customer support. According to the research, customer-employee interaction also affects customer's emotion, experience value and satisfaction [3,5]. However, the influence mechanism still needs to be fully discussed about the customer-employee interaction on customer behavioral intention. In fact, on the one hand, customer-employee interaction is the source of social support for customers [4,6]. On the other hand, social support will affect the behavioral intention for customers [7-8]. Therefore, whether and how social support plays an intermediary role between customer-employee interaction and their behavioral intention remains to be revealed. In the study of hotel service, both customers and employees are the main bodies of service interaction, and they are interdependent. In service interaction, social relations cannot be separated. The influence of customer-employee interaction on customers' social relations and psychological benefits is a topic worthy of attention. Customer-employee interactions may lead to positive social relationships, which in turn lead to positive follow-up actions. On the contrary, negative social relations occurs, leading to customer loss.

Based on the theory of social interaction and social support, this study takes customers of high-star hotels as the research object to explore the relationship between customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention. Specifically, studying the relationship between customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention is to explore the intermediary role of social support between customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention.

## **2. Literature Review and Research Hypothesis**

### **2.1. Literature Review**

#### **2.1.1. Customer-employee Interaction**

Customer-employee interaction has always been the focus of marketing research. The concept of service interaction originates from service contact, namely, the contact between customers and employees, customers and environment, customers and customers in the service process [9]. Among them, customer-employee interaction refers to the face-to-face interaction between customers and employees, both verbal and non-verbal interaction, including mutual transmission and communication at different levels of behavior, language, consciousness, motivation and other elements. Combined with the service characteristics of hotel industry, it is agreed that the interaction between hotel customer and employee refers to the verbal or non-verbal communication between them in the service process.

At present, academics believe that there are two and three dimensions of customer-employee interaction. Regarding the two-dimension theory, for example, Islam believes that the customer-employee interaction is divided into two dimensions of quality and quantity interaction [10]. While Fan believes that customer-employee interaction can be divided into two dimensions of social oriented interaction and service-oriented. As for the three dimensions theory, Berscheid holds that the customer-employee interaction is divided into three dimensions of interaction frequency, interaction activity and interaction intensity [12]. According to Jianqin Wang, it can be divided into three dimensions of information interaction, commodity or service interaction and interpersonal interaction [13].

In the past literature, scholars have done massive research on the interaction between customers and employees. Researches on the influence of customer-employee interaction on customers mainly focus on emotion and experience. For example, Guoqing Guo and Naijuan Sun find that perceived interaction significantly affects the value of customer experience [15]. Xiaoyu Liu believes that in the process of consumers enjoying hotel services, their emotional interaction with employees will have a significant impact on employees and consumers' behavior. Good service quality will create a good communication atmosphere between consumers and employees, and promote consumers' consumption in the hotel and improve employees' service level [16].

#### **2.1.2. Behavioral Intention**

Behavioral intention is the behavioral strategy that customers may adopt in the future. Customer behavioral intention is not only the embodiment of whether they are willing to repurchase or recommend to others, but also the important premise of whether they are satisfied with the enterprise and thus generate loyalty. Customer behavior intention has a very important practical significance on the hotel. However, the transformation from behavioral intention to actual purchase will be influenced by many factors [17-18]. Only when the conditions of time, material ect. are ripe, behavioral intention can be transformed into real purchasing power. Therefore, how to improve the hotel customer behavioral intention has become an important topic in hotel marketing. Specific to this article, customers behavior intention to a hotel is stronger, it's more likely to have actual behavior of consumption and recommendation.

#### **2.1.3. Social Support**

Social support refers to information, emotion, material and other resources that consumers obtain from relatives, friends, enterprises, employees or other consumers [19]. According to different sources, social support can be divided into social support from relatives and friends, social support from customers and social support from enterprises [8,20-23]. Social support for enterprises includes social support for service personnel [4] and product communities [23]. At present, the research on social support mainly focuses on the prior variable that affects social support and the outcome variable of social support.

In terms of social support's prior factors, the academics mainly discusses the influence of

personal factors and social network (such as relationship strength and social interaction) on social support [6,24]. In terms of the social support's outcome variables, it's mainly exploring the influence of social support from the aspects of enterprises and customers. Among them, the influence of social support on enterprises is mainly concentrated in the aspects of sales performance, customer citizenship behavior, value co-creation and brand loyalty [7-8,23,25]. While the influence of social support on customers is mainly concentrated in the aspects of purchase decision, service evaluation and experience evaluation [24,26-27].

## **2.2. Hypothesis Propose**

### **2.2.1. Customer-employee Interaction and Behavior Intention**

Hotel customers not only evaluate the final result of service, but also the process of service delivery, which are mainly reflected in the customer-employee interaction process. Employees' high-quality and high-level service can leave a deep impression on customers, and good interaction can improve customer satisfaction and behavioral intention [15-16].

In this article, two dimensions of interaction frequency and interaction quality are adopted to measure the customer-employee interaction. Customers' evaluation of the hotel is mainly based on the interaction with employees in the service. Jianzhou Li and Xiucheng Fan believe that the mutual understanding between employees and customers depends on the accuracy of role playing and the similarity of cognition, which in turn comes from their background similarity, interaction frequency and target compatibility [28]. In fact, increasing the frequency of customer-employee interactions is helpful for both parties better to know each other. On the one hand, it can help employees understand customers' needs, solve their difficulties and provide top-quality service. On the other hand, it can make customers feel that they are valued and hereby improve their sense of identity. Rosenbaum and Massiah's took research on customers of fitness center and found that the more emotional communication and interaction between customers and employees, the higher their interaction frequency, and the more positive impact on customers' willingness to continuous consumption [27].

The simultaneity of service production and consumption itself determines the impact of interpersonal interaction on customer perception in the process of service delivery, and the quality of these interpersonal interaction behaviors affects customer service perception [29]. Service is also intangible, which makes it hard to use standardized data to evaluate the service quality, while it can only be measured through customer perception evaluation. When the quality of interaction between service personnel and customers is high, tangible evidence of service personnel's professionalism can improve customers' perception of their professionalism, thus enhancing customer satisfaction [30]. Researches by Chunxiao Wang and Biyan Wen show that the evaluation of the interaction quality between consumers and employees in the process of enjoying hotel services greatly influences customers' behavioral intention [31]. Therefore, hypothesis is proposed as below:

H1: Customer - employee interaction positive impact on customer behavior intention

H1a: Interaction frequency positive impact on behavioral intention

H1b: Interaction quality positive impact on behavioral intention

### **2.2.2. Customer-Employee Interaction and Social Support**

Social support refers to the information, emotion, material and other resources that consumers obtain from relatives, friends, enterprises, employees or other consumers. The higher the frequency of customer-employee interaction, the more information and physical resources customers can get from employees. Fuqiang Zhu believes that the key to the emergence and growth of enterprise organizations lies in that they gather different individuals on specific occasions and increase the interaction frequency between them, which is conducive to mutual support and cooperation [32].

Customer perception support, a kind of social resource, plays an important role in the process of service contact. Customers experience the company's support from the company's policies (overall service quality) [14], and the quality of customer-employee interaction will affect the emotions customers perceive from employees' services. In the process of interaction with sales staff and

service providers, consumers can confirm themselves and eliminate loneliness, so as to achieve a higher psychological level [19]. The interaction quality between service enterprises and customers affects customers' dependence on the hotel and makes them feel a sense of belonging [33]. Therefore, based on the above literatures, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H2: Customer - employee interaction affects positively on social support

H2a: Interaction frequency positive impact on social support

H2b: Interaction quality positive impact on social support

### 2.2.3. Social Support and Behavior Intention

In the interaction between customers and employees, the more abundant information and other resources customers acquire, the higher the sense of security they have in the consumption process, and the greater chance they choose to purchase. When customers receive less social support, they are more likely to feel negative, such as anxiety, entanglement and uneasiness, and more hesitation in consumption process. In the framework of Consumer-Purchase-Decision based on social support proposed by Li and Lee, consumers' purchase decision is influenced by the number, ability and intimacy of social support providers [7]. Meanwhile, customer perception support is positively correlated with self-efficacy and motivation. When customers feel more support from the company or employees, they are more likely to think they are capable and motivated to participate in the co-creation experience [34]. High levels of social support encourage customers to do something good for the company by being part of the service delivery process [35]. Hajli believes that social support will positively affect users' behavioral intention on the social interaction [8]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Social support has positive effect on customer behavior intention

### 2.2.4. Mediate Role of Social Support

The ultimate goal of customer-employee interaction in the hotel is to enable customers to obtain social support and promote their consumption. For the hotel industry with strong interaction, customers' perception of social support and behavioral intention are largely determined by the appropriate role playing of front-line employees in the service contact process. When employees' role playing is inconsistent with customers' expectations, customers will be dissatisfied, resulting in the lack of social support and affecting customers' behavioral intention. The customers-employee interaction is an important way for customers to obtain social support and meet their own needs. Through the interaction and communication with employees, they can obtain information, emotion and other resources, so that customers can make consumption decisions quickly. It's obviously that customer-employee interaction can indirectly affect customer behavioral intention through social support. The hypothesis is proposed as below:

H4: Social support mediates the relationship between customer-employee interaction and customer behavioral intention;

H4a: Social support mediates the relationship between customer-employee interaction frequency and customer behavioral intention;

H4b: Social support mediates the relationship between customer-employee interaction quality and customer behavioral intention.

Therefore, it comes to the Conception Model as Figure 1:

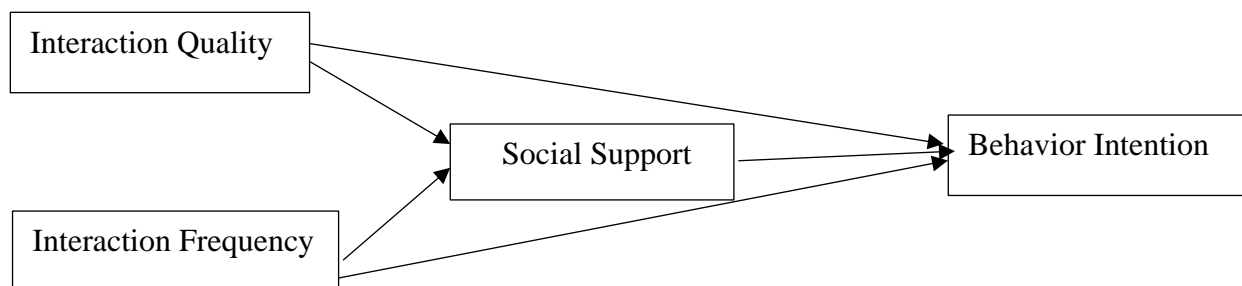


Fig. 1 Conception Model

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1. Variable Measurement**

For the measurement of customer-employee interaction, social support, behavioral intention and other variables, this article used the measurement scale of relevant literature and modified it appropriately according to the research purpose. Among them, two dimensions of interaction quality and interaction frequency are selected for the customer-employee interaction. The interaction quality is mainly referred to the scale of Wish [36] with five items, and the interaction frequency is mainly referred to the scale of Junsheng Wu [37] and Wenyu Che [38] with five items. Bettencourt's scale [35] was selected for social support with three items: If I have special needs and requirements, the hotel staff will strongly consider my needs; If I have special requirements, the hotel staff will be willing to help me; If I have a suggestion, the hotel will take care of it. Behavioral intention includes recommendation and repurchase intention, mainly refers to the study of Assaker et totally four measurement items [39], mainly including: I will actively recommend the hotel to others; I recommend the hotel when someone asks me for advice; I will choose this hotel as my first choice, when I need to check in again; I will still choose this hotel in the future even if there are other options. All the measured indicators are adopted from Likert 7-point Scale, respectively from "1" represents completely disagree to "7" of complete agreement.

#### **3.2. Receipt Collection and Sample Study**

Data collection of this study was conducted in the march to April of 2019, with research objects of four-star hotel customers from Chengdu, Dongguan, Xiamen, and Sanya. Among total 271 questionnaires, 245 effective, effective rate was 90.4%. Female were slightly higher than the male, total of 144 people; 71% were under 36 years old. Hotel guests were well educated, numbers of those with a high school diploma or less were in little difference (14% and 16% respectively). 171 Bachelor's degree or above (70%). In the sample, the frequency of hotel guests checked in the hotel within one year is between 0 and 6 times, accounting for 58%, and 7 times or more accounts for 42%. Among the reasons for checking in, the most are visitors of 108 (54%).

#### **3.3. Empirical Analysis**

SPSS19.0 and AMOS18.0 statistical software were used to analyze 245 valid samples. Each variable indexes of average range in 4.77 ~ 5.15, delete two indicators of the interaction frequency with standardized loading factors below 0.5. The rest variable index of standardized load ranging from 0.535 to 0.878. The following analysis is conducted from the fitness, the reliability and validity of the model.

#### **3.4. Reliability and Validity Analysis**

The reliability and validity tests of variables are shown in Table 1. The Cronbach's a coefficient of each index in the questionnaire is all higher than 0.7, the combined reliability (CR) is all higher than 0.8, and the average extraction variance (AVE) value is all greater than 0.5, indicating that the model established in this article is in good validity. Therefore, it's to be prove that the questionnaire designed in this study has a good reliability.

Table1 Reliability coefficient and AVE of variables

Variables	Items	Standard Load	Cronbach's a	CR	AVE
Interaction frequency	Frequent interaction with staff	0.845	0.825	0.8787	0.5970
	Close interaction with staff	0.857			
	Strong interaction with staff	0.882			
Interaction quality	Free communication with staff	0.535	0.825	0.8962	0.7421
	Co-working with staff	0.807			
	Mutual support with staff	0.807			
	Mutual consideration with staff	0.838			
	Pleasant interaction with staff	0.833			
Social Support	Staff help with those in troubles	0.768	0.753	0.8596	0.6715
	Staff listen to my or others' opinion	0.843			
	Staff is accommodating	0.845			
	Actively recommend hotel to other	0.858			
Behavioral Intention	I will recommend hotel when others ask for my suggestions.	0.878	0.858	0.9038	0.7091
	I will take this hotel as first choice when I need hotels again.	0.781			
	I will choose this hotel even if I have other choices.	0.831			

Discriminant validity is determined by comparing the square root of mean variance extraction (AVE) and the correlation coefficient of two variables. If the latter is smaller than the former, it indicates that the scale has discriminant validity. As it can be seen from the Table 2, the AVE square root of interaction frequency (0.7906), interaction quality (0.7948), social support (0.7204) and behavioral intention (0.7934) are all larger than the correlation coefficients with other variables, so the scale has a good discriminant validity.

Table 2 Variable Discriminant Validity

Variables	AVE	1	2	3	4
Interaction Frequency	0.5970	0.7906			
Interaction Quality	0.7421	0.576**	0.7948		
Social Support	0.6715	0.621**	0.478**	0.7204	
Behavior Intention	0.7019	0.546**	0.561**	0.514**	0.7934
Mean		4.9492	5.1234	4.7415	5.0742
Standard Deviation		0.96127	1.00711	0.99676	0.96718

Note. Diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct.

### 3.5. Model Test

#### 3.5.1. Goodness-of-fit Test

Confirmatory factor analysis model of card square value chi-square = 200.017,  $p < 0.001$ ; Chi-square /df = 2.326,  $< 3$ . Comparative fit index CFI=0.933; IFI = 0.933; The non-standard fitting index TLI=0.918, all of which are larger than the standard of 0.900, and the approximate root mean square of error RMSEA=0.075, less than 0.080, indicating that the model fit in this study is good.

### 3.5.2. Model Estimation Results

Table 3 Model Estimation Results

Relationships	Hypothesis	Standardized coefficients	CR	Hypothesis Verification
Interaction frequency – behavior intention	H1a	0.371***	5.972	Supported
Interaction quality – behavior intention	H1b	0.335***	5.397	Supported
Interaction frequency – social support	H2a	0.185***	3.022	Supported
Interaction quality – social support	H2b	0.516**	8.438	Supported
Social support – behavior intention	H3	0.514***	9.169	Supported

Note.\*\*\*P<0.01, \*\*P<0.05

Taking the structural equation model and test research hypothesis, the results are shown as below table that in the test of customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention, the standard coefficient value of interaction frequency is 0.371,  $P<0.001$ , namely, interaction frequency has an impact on behavioral intention. H1a is assumed to be supported. The standard coefficient value of interaction quality is 0.335,  $P<0.001$ , that is, interaction quality has an impact on behavioral intention. H1b is assumed to be supported. Therefore, customer-employee interaction has a direct impact on behavioral intention, namely, hypothesis H1 is supported. In the test of customer-employee interaction and social support, the standard coefficient value of interaction frequency is 0.185,  $P<0.001$ , that is, interaction frequency has an impact on social support. The standard coefficient of interaction quality is 0.516,  $P<0.005$ , namely, interaction quality has an impact on social support. Hypothesis H2b is to be supported. Therefore, customer-employee interaction has a positive impact on social support, that is, hypothesis H2 is to be supported. In the test of social support and behavioral intention, the standard coefficient of social support is 0.514,  $P<0.001$ , namely, social support has a positive impact on behavioral intention, that is, hypothesis H3 is to be supported.

### 3.6. Mediation Variables Test

It's a highly organized way to verify the mediation effect of mediation variables with the macro Plug-in Process in SPSS19.0. The test results are shown in Table 4. It can be seen from Table 4 that the estimated value of the point from path interaction frequency → social support → behavioral intention is 0.1463, and the range of minimum value and maximum value is [0.0839,0.2231] without 0 value, indicating that the indirect effect is significant. Therefore, social support has a mediating effect in the relationship between interaction frequency and behavioral intention, namely, H4a is supported. The estimated value is 0.1783, and the range of minimum value and maximum value is [0.0984,0.2822] without 0 value, indicating that the indirect effect is significant. Therefore, social support has a mediating effect in the relationship between interaction quality and behavioral intention, that is, H4b is established. To sum up, social support has a mediating effect in the influence mechanism of customer-employee interaction on behavioral intention, namely, hypothesis H4 is supported.

Table 4 Mediation Role Test of Social Support

Path	Point Estimate	Standard Error E	Value Z	BootLL CI	BootUL CI
Interaction frequency –Social support-behavior intention	0.1463	0.0341	4.5591	0.0839	0.2231
Interaction quality—Social support-behavior intention	0.1783	0.0457	3.9795	0.0984	0.2822

## **4. Research Conclusions and Suggestions**

### **4.1. Research Conclusions**

Starting from the perspective of hotel customers, this study takes the interaction between customers and employees as the independent variable and behavioral intention as the dependent variable to explore the influence mechanism of the interaction between customers and employees on the behavioral intention of customers, and finds out the role of social support in the interaction between customers and employees and behavioral intention, and draws conclusions as below:

Firstly, customer-employee interaction is quite common during the process of hotel service. Customer-employee interaction is the basis of social support and customer behavior intention. The interaction between customers and employees not only has a significant impact on the perceived social support of customers, but also positively affects their behavioral intention. Therefore, the promotion of customer-employee interaction is conducive to the hotel's promotion of customer behavior intention.

Secondly, customer-employee interaction is conducive to improving customers' social support. The research shows that the frequency and quality of interaction between customers and employees have significant influence on social support. The interaction frequency is conducive to increasing the communication opportunities between customers and employees. The more communication between customers and employees, the more abundant information and emotional support they will get. The interactive quality reflects the interaction effect between customers and employees, and the interaction effect is the basis for customers to evaluate whether the hotel has obtained social support.

Thirdly, social support has a positive impact on customer behavior intention. The results show that the customer perception of hotel or staff support, will contribute to a positive consumption decision; Meanwhile, it will also conduct positive public praise evaluation, which is conducive to increasing the probability of customers' repurchase and recommendation the hotel to others.

Fourthly, social support plays an intermediary role in the relationship between customer-employee interaction and customer behavioral intention. This research conclusion indicates that customer-employee interaction not only directly affects customer behavioral intention, but also indirectly influences behavioral intention through social support. For hotels, they cannot solely rely on customer-employee interaction to improve behavioral intention, and they should also pay high attention to the variable of social support.

### **4.2. Management Implications**

Behavioral intention is an important part of hotel marketing, but also the premise of the hotel to obtain customer loyalty. Behavioral intention will not only increase customers' repurchase intention, but also make customers spontaneously recommend the hotel, so as to achieve a good publicity role. In this way, not only to enhance the competitiveness of the hotel, but also to reduce the hotel publicity costs. Therefore, the hotel should pay attention to the interaction between customers and employees, focus on improving customer behavior intention. As for how to improve the behavioral intention of customers, the author puts forward the following suggestions:

Firstly, the hotel should build up a good service team. In the hotel, interaction frequency and quality will directly affect the customer experience perception of the enterprise. Improving the interaction between customers and employees is conducive to enhancing the behavioral intention of customers, and the customer-employee interaction can be improved from two aspects of interaction frequency and quality. In terms of interaction frequency, the opportunity for interaction and communication between customers and employees can be increased, such as designing more attractive and experiential activities for customers so to increase the contact between customers and employees. At the same time, improving staff's professionalism and creating a good environment for their interaction. In terms of interaction quality, the staff should enhance their enthusiasm for customers and make them willing to communicate and interact with customers, so as to deepen customers' impression on the hotel and leave good experience memories. Encouraging employees to view problems from the perspective of customers, understanding customers and supporting



customers, so as to improve the quality of customer-employee interaction.

Secondly, the hotel should pay attention to the customer perception of social support provided hereby. Social support positively affects not only on customers' behavioral intention, but also influences the behavioral intention of customers through the mediating variable of social support. The management enlightenment of this research conclusion is that customers should consider the support they get in the hotel during their consumption, such as providing them with more useful information in the service process, and trying to meet their needs when they have special needs, so as to improve their behavioral intention.

Thirdly, the hotel should improve the service scene created both by customers and employees. The conclusion of the study on customer-employee interaction shows that customers and employees create the hotel service scene together. The management implications of this study are that hotels need to manage customer-employee interactions to create positive service scene. First of all, when determining the target market, hotel should select suitable target customer groups for the hotel product, so as to enhance the positive interaction between employees; Secondly, when hiring staff, the hotel should recruit responsible staff and strengthen training for them, then to enhance the positive interaction with customers. With the above efforts to create a good service scene.

### **4.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies**

The interaction between hotel customers and employees is a two-way interaction, this article studies the customer-employee interaction on customer behavior intention from the perspective of customers, has certain theoretical and practical significance. However, there are some deficiencies in this study. First, due to the limitation of time, energy, financial resources and other factors, the questionnaire was mainly distributed among four hotels, and the scope of the respondents was relatively narrow, which to some extent, affected the universality of the research conclusion. Second, this study did not consider the moderating effect of different demographic attributes such as income and organizational atmosphere on customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention. To sum up, the following perspectives are proposed for future research: First of all, test the validity of the model in different types of hotels in future research investigations. Second, consider the mediating role of psychological variables such as experience value in the relationship between customer-employee interaction and behavioral intention. Third, take into account of the moderating effect of hotel organizational atmosphere and other variables in the model. Finally, in the context of sharing economy, customer-employee interaction occurs not only offline, but also in the virtual community, and how such interaction affects behavioral intention is also a problem worth studying.

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